

Nahum 101

‘The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.’

- *Nab.* 1:1

If you have your Bible with you, please turn with me to the book of Jonah. (And yes, I am serious in calling you to *that* book.)

We recently finished the book of Jonah with these stirring, perplexing, but still *final* words found at 4:10: ‘Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know between their right and left hand?’

There is a profound drama to these words: God by grace justifying the ungodly through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, whom Jonah portrayed and foreshadowed. A nation that deserved judgment - that was *ripe* for judgment - whom God said He *would* judge - was spared. God, over against Jonah’s complaint, justified Nineveh: ‘Should I not have compassion.’

It’s with a sense of solemnity, then, that we now turn in our Bibles, after the book of Jonah, and past the book of Micah, to read these words in the next book, Nahum...

In May 1976, the American Broadcasting Company began a series of radio programs that presented factual stories on a variety of subjects. Usually there was a surprising ‘twist’ at the end of each program, whose famous narrator, Paul Harvey, would conclude for the audience that now they knew ‘the rest of the story’.

As we begin to study the book of Nahum today, we come to know, in relation to what we have studied in the book of Jonah, ‘the rest of the story’.

You'll remember that 8th century Jonah preached to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. His message was that God would judge them for their wickedness. Nineveh repented of sin, and God relented of calamity.

Some 100-150 years later, God is speaking to Nineveh again. This time it is through the prophet Nahum. His message is somewhat similar to Jonah's: judgment. *The difference is that, this time, God in no way intends to show compassion to Nineveh.* They had their day of grace. And now it is their day of judgment. Such is the essence of 1:1, 14; 2:8-10, 13; 3:7...

And as we begin today to familiarize ourselves with this often-neglected book, we consider first, like the book of Jonah, that *there are profound and meaningful ironies.*

One irony is that this ancient book, composed some 2,600 years ago, presents itself to us in a very contemporary way. What do I mean?

We are very much (in some cases, too much) a visually oriented culture. We are driven by the image. It dominates marketing and advertising. It permeates much of our time, and the way we use it with television and computers.

And the book of Nahum, somewhat ironically, *communicates in a way that is highly visual.* It reads as though it were a film. We can easily visualize what is said. Without pressing it, but simply to make the point about the brutal honesty with which it presents its somber themes of sin and judgment, the book of Nahum is somewhat R-rated. There is violence (2:3). There are epic/graphic battle scenes (2:3-7). There is even brief nudity, as God reveals Nineveh's shame by lifting up her skirts and showing the nations what is underneath (2:5-6). Ironically, it reads as a motion picture.

Just note the raciness of 2:3-9... And note also how, like a movie, the scenes and characters switch back and forth very quickly: 1:8; 1:9; 1:11; 1:12; 1:14; 1:15 - 2:1; 2:3; 3:11...

It is a highly visual book that, ironically, reads as a film.

Now, as an aside, this does not justify changing the written word of God into visual means. Whenever and wherever that is done you will find an ignorance of the truth, whether it is the Stations of the Cross, pictures of Jesus, or modern forms of drama amidst alleged worship of God. No, faith will always come, as God ordained it to come, by hearing and reading (cf. *Rom.* 10:17; *John* 5:39f.). Nor are we indifferent to the R-rated and sit-com filth on television. I merely put it like this so that you become familiar with the book, and note something of the timelessness and relevance of the written Word of God.

But we go on to a main set of ironies. The prophet Nahum himself emphasizes it all in his very name (like many other Bible characters whose names embody something of God's purpose). We do not note merely that as there is a thematic flow from Jonah to Nahum, so do the last 3 letters of Jonah's name begin the first 3 letters of Nahum's. Such is interesting, but not the kind of irony and insight we mean. There is something more profound.

It is that God would call a prophet by the name of 'Nahum' for the purpose of declaring judgment on Nineveh. For Nahum means 'comfort'. (The pronunciation of his name - *nakhum* - is very close to the Hebrew word (*rakhum*) for 'compassion' that was such a feature of the book of Jonah. It seems God assigned Nahum to preach - and no other - so that Nineveh would recall the Lord's compassion demonstrated in connection with Jonah's presence and preaching earlier. But now, Nineveh is brought to realize that 'comfort', and all hope of it, is now long past. Although Nahum's prophecy stands before them, there is no 'nahum'. Nineveh has long since left her once-new love.

And going further, the name 'Nahum' underscores the solemn truth that in that God once relented of calamity against Nineveh, He now reverts again to bring it. In the English language, a verb has different tenses: I *run*, I *ran*, I *will run* (and so forth).

And in the Hebrew language, a verb, depending on its form, has various *meanings*. And *this* verbal form of ‘nahum’, though in one form it refers to ‘comfort’ (Piel), in another means ‘relent’ (Niphal).

It is here that we see irony at work even further. God once ‘relented’ of overthrowing Nineveh (*Jon.* 3:9). Instead he showed ‘compassion’ and ‘comfort’. But now, with Nahum, God has ‘relented’ the *other* way. He has turned back again to the terrifying and burning anger of anti-Sodom and anti-Gomorrah proportions that once set the Ninevites into the depths of repentance. And Nahum - by the very nuances of his name - sets forth both a ‘comfort’ from which Nineveh has tragically turned, as well as a ‘relenting’ of God to now bring on Nineveh the kind of judgment for which Jonah probably wished. And thus it is, as the book begins, ‘the burden of Nineveh’ - that heavy oracle of judgment God showed Nahum about Nineveh.

But going still further with the very name of ‘Nahum’. It is one thing that God would relent (*nahum*) of calamity, extend a compassionate comfort (*rahum/nahum*) to Nineveh, and then upon their reverting to their old ways, Himself revert (*nahum*) to His earlier inclination to judge them. But it is yet another - and ironically and wonderfully so! - that this would all be for the true and lasting comfort of his own covenant people.

The prophet Nahum stands for a ‘comfort’ Nineveh lost, but also a ‘comfort’ Judah would gain.

At this point in history, the Assyrians are the oppressive foe of God’s people. And Nineveh is their capital city. God had used these Assyrians as His own instrument of judgment to punish the northern 10 tribes of Israel in 722 BC. It is now some 100 years later, and Judah is comforted (for a time) in hearing of this foe’s judgment.

So these are some ironies that help ‘open up’ the book of Jonah before us.

But in noting these, what have we really said? What have we really learned? What is the main point that is before us as we study the book of Nahum?

It is that *God's sovereignty is especially displayed in judging the wicked while saving His own.* It is not a book merely about God judging a nation. It is not only about, even, His attributes of justice and wrath (which are prominent in the book). No, it is about His sovereignty displayed in judging the wicked while saving His own.

Ill. Some have difficulty patting their head and rubbing their stomach in a circle at the same time. And there are doubtless many other things we have difficulty doing together at the same time.

But God displays both mercy and justice in a single act. He can judge His enemies while saving His people. He can bring good out of evil, and even use evil for His good purpose.

The 18th Psalm is a wonderful example of God showing Himself against the wicked in dark, solemn, almost haunting ways: earth quaking, mountains trembling, anger, smoke from His nostrils, fire from His mouth, thunder from His voice, arrows from his quiver.

But why did He descend from heaven this way? 'He took me, and drew me from a pit. He delivered me from my strong enemy,' says the Psalmist (18:16-17). God displayed His glorious justice for the purpose of rescuing His beloved David. *He did both at the same time and by the same act.*

And there is also the cross on which our Lord died. There was no less than the very Son of God as the Son of Man punctured with nails, crowned with thorns, blood flowing from His body, blood covering and soaking into the wood of the cross - and all under the *justice* of God against us for our sins.

And yet, there was also *mercy* flowing from His veins and in that blood. For by that very act of the crucifixion and suffering of Christ, God was not only *judging* all the

sins of His people, He was also *forgiving* all the sins of His people. 'I will sing of justice and mercy.' (Psa. 101:1)

So we ought to see in the book of Nahum that *God's sovereignty is especially displayed in judging the wicked while saving His own.* Thus, as an introduction to the book of Nahum - some of the *ironies* associated with Nahum himself in relation to his vision.

But what are implications for us to aid our reading and learning the book, now that we are familiar with these things?

First, Nahum reminds us that God will only tolerate sin and its pride so long. There will be only so many opportunities for repentance, and then, God's judgment will rush in as a flood, and come crashing down like a storm. We expect this of the final Judgment. It often happens that way throughout history. It did with Nineveh.

God will only tolerate sin and its pride so long. Look at Nineveh. They existed since the time of Nimrod (*Gen. 10:11*). They grew in strength and wickedness such that God would highlight it through the prophet Jonah. But when he threatened them with judgment, and they repented and believed, he let them see (and have!) His compassion.

But then they turned from it. And for some 100 years or more since then, they return to their idols and images (cf. *Nab. 1:14*). They grew proud under God, corrupt in themselves, and oppressive toward His people. But then His judgment took them by surprise after so long a time.

God will only tolerate sin and its pride so long.

Do you stand outside of Jesus Christ today? Have not yet come to Him for righteousness, forgiveness, and peace though you have been called to? Are you still going on in sin, after so many (perhaps) pledges and intentions to the contrary? Do you hold off what your conscience tells you is right until some later point, perhaps your death bed? *God will only tolerate sin and its pride so long.* There will be only so many

opportunities for repentance, and then, God's judgment will rush in as a flood, and come crashing down like a storm. 'He is patient toward you, not wanting any to perish, but that all should come to repentance.' Let today be your *salvation* day, then. For it may be your *last* day. His enduring your sin and evil has been long, hasn't it? But His steadfast love will endure forever more. Which is the better choice for your soul's good - salvation in Christ, or judgment from Christ?

Second, we learn from Nineveh that the saving blessings of God for one generation are not guaranteed for the next apart from the repentance and faith through which they were given at the first. God brought salvation to Nineveh at the time of Jonah. And they lived in that blessing for a time. We can imagine them rejoicing as they exchanged their sackclothes for their former clothes, and washed away their dust with oil.

But then, in a following generation, like weeds in a garden, they allowed their idols to appear once again. Former clothes led to former sins. And a now-distant Jonah meant for again-present idols. There was no guarantee of salvation for the next generation apart from faith and repentance, as it is for *any* generation or people - even for God's people in the covenant. It has never been any other way. It will never be any other way.

There must *always* be faith in Christ if one is to receive the blessings of salvation. We must here remember to distinguish between the promise and faith. One is not saved through merely hearing the promise. He is saved through *believing* the promise. The Israelites had and heard promises - many of them. But only some believed them. Others did not, and they were condemned in their unbelief. Thus, the others were saved through their faith. The saving blessings of God for one generation are not guaranteed for the next apart from the repentance and faith through which they were given at the first. God guarantees in the covenant; but only through faith.

We must remember this as Reformed Christians who (rightly) believe in ‘covenant theology’ as it pertains to our children. They will not be saved on account of the covenant sign of baptism administered as an ordinance. That is a sign and promise that points them to greater, spiritual realities outside of themselves, which, not being seen, must be believed. So they have received water. They must receive the Spirit. They must be born again. They must be taught of their sinfulness so as to know their real need of a Savior to rescue them from their own sins and God’s wrath.

The promises of God for parents and baptized children in the covenant are so that parents and children would have encouragement to rest in Christ on the one hand, but also that parents and children would not presume against Him on the other.

So then, let us all - parents and children - be about believing and receiving the blessings of salvation that God freely offers to us in Christ. Believe, and see how real they are!

Finally, the book of Nahum, though it speaks primarily to God’s relation to Nineveh, speaks in principal to each of us in terms of our own relation to God. We believe that all Scripture is not only inspired of God, but also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 *Tim.* 3:16). ‘These things were written for our benefit,’ the apostle Paul says concerning the Old Testament for New Testament Christians. As we will see in forthcoming lessons, God’s judgment of Nineveh implies rich themes of personal sin against God, the final judgment, and the very NT gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not Nineveh, true. But ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’ The themes that had to do with them have to do with our world today. The sins that had to do with that population have to do with ours, even ourselves. Judah’s place under Nineveh’s oppression has to do with the Church’s today under the world’s. The way God relieved and encouraged Judah has to do with what He offers us even today.

Tell me, you who profess faith in Jesus Christ; you have made a profession of faith *once*. But what are you doing with it *now*? Nineveh professed faith once. But look what happened to them at a later generation after they had abandoned it, and did not live according to it! It is the same with us as individual Christians in relation to our children and grandchildren. Are you concerned to persevere in faith and good works? To work out your salvation with fear and trembling? To make His calling and choosing you sure? Do you love your unborn generation so as to live for the good and wellbeing of those born so that *they* will pass on a gospel heritage to *their* offspring? God is concerned for that. He is concerned for faithfulness. He delights in those who delight in His delights.

Who would have thought that the story of Nineveh, at least from what we knew in Jonah, would become ‘the rest of the story’ as it did in Nahum?

Truly, all start as wretches; but some are changed under God’s compassion in Jesus Christ. Some, having started with a professed faith in Jesus Christ, manifest a real and unchanged wretchedness later. The gospel of Jesus Christ, then, like Nineveh, is that axiom on which our lives turn, and depending on what we do with Jesus, unfolds ‘the rest of our story’.

What will *you* do with Jesus Christ? Will you take Him as *your* Savior? Will you obey Him as *your* Lord? Will you keep Him as such, and walk by faith in Him through all your days, depending and walking in the strength of His Holy Spirit?

Let us, each one, come not only to profess faith in Jesus Christ, but love and keep Him as ‘the rest of our story’.